

The Numismatist

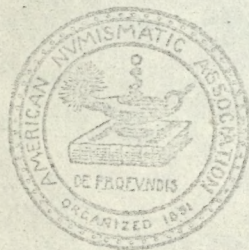
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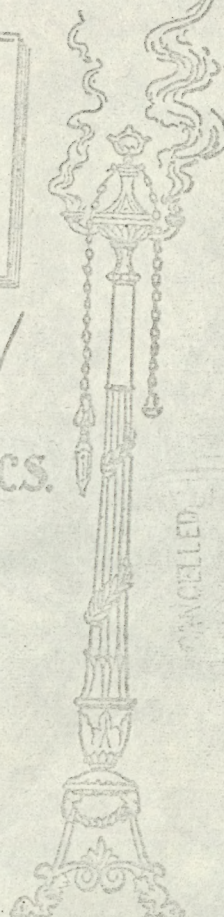
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CALIFORNIA PRIVATE COINAGE.

[The following interesting article concerning the private gold coinage of California was taken from the *San Francisco Chronicle* of Feb. 26, 1888.—Ed.]

The customers of a Sansome street bank have recently been treated to a sample of the strict and retired way in which the New York tellers and note clerks conduct their share of the business. Instead of the free and open counter over which we have been so long accustomed to lean and lounge, chatting easily with the cashier in handling distance of the trays of coin, this bank has erected a barrier—a handsome gilt wire barrier, but still a barrier—between its officers and its customers. In this barrier are constructed little wickets, and through them the coin or paper transaction is conducted. This is the way, it is repeated, in which banks shut up their attachés in New York, and it is only a question of time now before it will be generally followed here. The barrier of the Sansome street bank is a sign of the times. It shows that the old customs of San Francisco are passing away, and that the unique is being laid aside.

For many years San Francisco has had its own peculiar way of doing business, incurring debts and settling them, of handling coin and computing values, of deifying gold and swearing at copper. Some of these peculiarities remain, but many of them have been set aside, and it will be fitting at this transition state to dwell for a half hour on a few of them, with particular consideration of the oddities of our monetary transactions.

Because of its first remoteness and the astonishing character of its first years of growth, San Francisco was by no means flush of current coin in the old days. Previous to the discovery of gold and the consequent rapid influx of population, there was very little coin in the country, and that little mostly in the towns of Monterey, San Diego and Los Angeles. Payments throughout the country were frequently made in cattle, hides, etc., Frank Soule stating that an informant of his had seen a physician's bill of \$20 settled by "two cows in full." This was in 1847 near Los Angeles. With its Mexican memories it was but natural that California should retain many of its old tokens of association, and it so happened that even after the secession Mexican doubloons or ounces and Mexican dollars were the principal coins in use. The original value of the doubloon was \$16, but in San Francisco it was received for \$15.75. After the discovery of gold that metal in its natural state became the currency. Gold dust was the common form in which it was dealt in, and in 1848 and 1849 the bankers' rates were as follows: For grain dust \$15.50 to \$15.75 per ounce, and for quicksilver dust, \$14.50 to \$14.75 per ounce. This was when coin was paid out for the dust. When the banks received it on deposit they valued it at \$16 per ounce, and repaid it at the same rate.

These rates were not settled without some difficulty. On the 9th of September, 1848, a great public meeting was held in San Francisco to fix the price of gold dust to pass as currency until a branch mint could be built. Dr. T. M. Leavenworth was in the chair, and J. D. Hoppe was made secretary. Miners came from all parts of the state to attend the meeting, which was of especial importance to them, and it was the most important gathering that had then taken place. The result was that the current value of dust was set down at \$16 the ounce. The precious dust was then used for all purposes and on all occasions. It was about this time that Governor Mason announced that thereafter gold dust would be received for customs duty, with the right of redemption in gold or silver coin within 180 days at \$10 an ounce. The conflict of these valuations was even more extended, and gold dust was treated more as a commodity with a varying standard, subject to supply and demand, than as a fixed currency. It was also subject to the amount of

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at disposal, for whenever there was plenty of coin the circulating medium of course went down. Sometimes there is one transaction on record in which a quantity bro

Everything was gold. There was actually more of it to do with. Frank Soule, in his "Annals" says: "At the miners, though great, were little compared to what collected. But any positive statement on this matter is since none could personally know more than what was t scene of his own operations, or where he was immediately we compare different accounts and endeavor to form from an average, we might find that from \$10 to \$15 worth of annual proceeds of an ordinary day's work. But while th average, people listened more to the individual instances of Well authenticated accounts described many well know from \$100 to \$200 a day for a long period. Numerous othe ing from \$500 to \$800 a day. A nugget four pounds in weigh indeed, in many cases a man with pick and pan did not e \$10 worth of dust in a single day he just moved off to son thought might be richer. When the miners knew a little men and the mode of turning their labor to the most profit were correspondingly increased. At what were called th regularly, the yield of gold was enormous. One piece of thirteen pounds weight. The auriferous earth, dug out of r sides of mountains, was packed on horses and carried on tw great water to be washed. An average price of this w period as much as \$400 a ton. In one instance five loads of which yielded after washing \$16,000. Cases occurred where racks on their backs to the stream and collected from \$8 the proceeds of their labor. Individuals made their \$5,000 the space of only a few weeks. One man dug out \$12,000 in

It was a perfect glut of gold dug with butchers' knives, pans and wooden chopping bowls, picked it out with a shar is old straw hats, secured it somehow. Within the first eig days had been fairly known \$250,000 had reached San Fran within the next week \$600,000 more, all to purchase addit miners. Gold dust paid for everything and filled the pocket every man. Millions worth of pure gold in lumps and in d every month. The greater portion of it was forwarded in payment of goods, but in the transit much was approp currency among the ever plotting and restless San Francisco had made money in spite of himself. Bags of gold dust v nearly as cake. The gamblers at the public saloon planked and guessed at the weight. Men had a sublime indifference and talked indifferently of dust and dollars. There was no any service, however slight, than half a dollar; for any ar 50 cents. The lowest price of admission to a circus wa price of a private box. Thirty dollars a week or \$8 a day and boarding. Every mouthful at dinner had its value at \$1 to \$5.

Gold was a drug, but as in the case of King Midas it could be converted into the necessities of life. Wheat, flour a barrel; potatoes and brown sugar at 37½ cents a pound and 10 cents; coarse boots \$30 to \$40 a pair, and a first-class

coin at disposal, for whenever there was plenty of coin the value of gold dust as a circulating medium of course went down. Sometimes it went to \$8 an ounce; and there is one transaction on record in which a quantity brought but \$4.

Everything was gold. There was actually more of it than people knew what to do with. Frank Soule, in his "Annals" says: "At first the general gains of the miners, though great, were little compared to what shortly afterward were collected. But any positive statement on this matter is naturally subject to error, since none could personally know more than what was taking place around the scene of his own operations, or where he was immediately traveling. If, however, we compare different accounts and endeavor to form from them something like a fair average, we might find that from \$10 to \$15 worth of gold dust was about the usual proceeds of an ordinary day's work. But while that might have been the average, people listened more to the individual instances of extraordinary success. Well authenticated accounts described many well known persons as averaging from \$100 to \$200 a day for a long period. Numerous others were said to be earning from \$500 to \$800 a day. A nugget four pounds in weight was early found. If, indeed, in many cases a man with pick and pan did not easily gather some \$30 or \$40 worth of dust in a single day he just moved off to some other place which he thought might be richer. When the miners knew a little better about the business and the mode of turning their labor to the most profitable account the returns were correspondingly increased. At what were called the "dry diggings," particularly, the yield of gold was enormous. One piece of pure gold was found of thirteen pounds weight. The auriferous earth, dug out of ravines and holes in the sides of mountains, was packed on horses and carried on two or three mules to the nearest water to be washed. An average price of this washing dirt was at one period as much as \$400 a ton. In one instance five loads of such earth sold for \$752 which yielded after washing \$16,000. Cases occurred where men carried the earth in sacks on their backs to the stream and collected from \$880 to \$1500 in a day as the proceeds of their labor. Individuals made their \$5,000, \$10,000 and \$15,000 in the space of only a few weeks. One man dug out \$12,000 in six days."

It was a perfect glut of gold dug with butchers' knives, washed it out in milk pans and wooden chopping bowls, picked it out with a sharpened stick, worked it in old straw hats, secured it somehow. Within the first eight weeks after the diggings had been fairly known \$250,000 had reached San Francisco in gold dust, and within the next week \$600,000 more, all to purchase additional supplies for the mines. Gold dust paid for everything and filled the pockets of every shrewd and active man. Millions worth of pure gold in lumps and in dust reached San Francisco every month. The greater portion of it was forwarded to the Atlantic states in payment of goods, but in the transit much was appropriated and retained as currency among the ever plotting and restless San Franciscans. For a time everybody made money in spite of himself. Bags of gold dust were handed about as freely as cake. The gamblers at the public saloon planked them down as stakes and guessed at the weight. Men had a sublime indifference to the smaller coins and talked indifferently of dust and dollars. There was nothing less received for any service, however slight, than half a dollar; for any article, however trifling, than 25 cents. The lowest price of admission to a circus was \$3, while \$55 was the price of a private box. Thirty dollars a week or \$8 a day was the sum asked for food and boarding. Every mouthful at dinner had its value and the meal cost from \$1 to \$5.

Gold was a drug, but as in the case of King Midas it was with difficulty it could be converted into the necessities of life. Wheat, flour and salt pork sold at \$1 a barrel; potatoes and brown sugar at 37½ cents a pound; a small loaf of bread 10 cents; coarse boots \$30 to \$40 a pair, and a first-class pair \$100. Washing

cost from \$12 to \$20 a dozen, laborers' wages were \$1 an hour, and skilled mechanics received \$12 to \$20 a day. Every brick in a house was valued at a dollar and lumber was \$500 per thousand feet. Three hundred dollars a month in advance were paid as rent for a single store of limited dimensions, made of rough boards. Eight to 15 per cent. per month were paid in advance for the use of money and ministers were paid \$10,000 per annum for their services. Butchers' knives were worth \$20 apiece, eggs at one time were sold at \$3 each, tea and coffee at \$4 a pound, laudanum cost \$1 a drop, three pills \$30, spirits from \$10 to \$40 a quart, picks and shovels from \$5 to \$15 each, while pickles, fruit, fresh pork, sweet butter or a box of seidlitz powders brought just exactly what the holder wished to ask.

Gradually this altogether abnormal condition of things righted itself, although the process was by no means a rapid one. The supply of the necessities and luxuries of life grew apace and brought the price down to a reasonable basis, but the want of a proper circulating medium was still felt. The national mintage came in too slow, and specimens of nearly all the coinages of the civilized world were in circulation. Approximate values were bestowed upon the pieces, and if anything near the mark, they readily passed current. The English shilling, the American quarter dollar, the French franc, and the Mexican double real were all of the same value; so likewise were the English crown, the French five-franc piece, and the American and Mexican dollar. On the other hand four single francs were quite as good as a five-franc piece, in that they were worth a dollar. The smaller silver coins of whatever denomination and of every country were all alike bits, and passed for the same value. As for copper money, it was, of course, never seen. The free acceptance of silver was one of the peculiarities of the years 1850-51. Besides the coins mentioned there were Indian rupees, Dutch and German florins and guilders, the many coinages of South America, in fact, every known piece of silver money that circulated in Europe or any other part of the world. Barrels of francs were imported, bought at 18 cents in France and sold at 25 cents in San Francisco. The Swiss batzen, of a value of $2\frac{1}{2}$ cents, and the German 6-kreutzer piece were accepted as bits—everything in fact went, provided it was silver.

With gold, matters were quite different. Dust continued to be plentiful but coin continued to be scarce. Finally the banks took hold, and as the only way to settle the difficulty commenced the coinage of private gold. A few words here relative to the early banking history of San Francisco will be apropos: All the mercantile houses having safes—such as Ward & Co., W. H. Davis, Melliss, Howard & Co., Dewitt & Harrison, Cross & Co., and Macondray & Co.—received deposits and paid them out again. As the population increased this work became so great that the necessity of houses devoted especially to the business began to be felt, and the first of these to be established was that of Naglee & Pinton, who opened their "Exchange & Deposit Office" on Kearney and Merchant streets, January 9, 1849. Burgoyne & Co. followed on June 5th; the bank of B. Davidson was opened in September; that of Thomas G. Wells (afterwards Wells & Co.) in October, and that of James King of William, on December 5th. D. J. Tallant (afterwards Tallant & Wilde) opened his banking house in February, 1850; and Page, Bacon & Co. and F. Argenti & Co. theirs in June of the same year.

The first firm to set the example of private coinage was that of Moffat & Co., long the United States assay contractors. They first issued the immense fifty dollar gold pieces—generally octagonal in shape—and known as slugs. They also issued ten and twenty dollar pieces. Their example was soon followed by about a dozen other establishments all more or less connected with the various banks. Adams & Co., the expressmen and bankers, for instance, efficiently used their interest to introduce the gold five, ten and twenty dollar gold pieces struck by

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J. G. Kellogg and Wess, Molitor & Co. All these were acknowledged by, but were contrary to law; but the Government mintage, was a great convenience by the United States officials. Some of the and stray specimens may yet be found occasionally, as may be seen by the cuts that are present. Imitation of the mint stamps, were coined without accepted at par to the extent of millions of dollars, mixed with about 12 per cent. of silver and without

On April 3, 1854, however, the branch mint, was opened on Commercial street, between Market and now occupied by the United States Land Office. The foreign silver coinage was all depreciated in value of Moffat & Co. were refused and in 1856 coinage of the private banks.

It has been found impossible to procure either the private gold coins that were struck in the early years, so evident that they must have been quite numerous. There must have been about twenty issues, seven one quintuple eagle, slug or fifty dollar piece; one six eagle, or ten dollar piece; six half eagle, or gold fifty cent piece; one quarter dollar, or gold fifty cent piece; one quarter dollar

The cut of the fifty dollar piece which is preserved and was evidently patterned after the old surpluse design of an eagle guarding a shield and the front a streamer on which is inscribed the word "EUREKA", the inscription "United States of America," and "THOMAS". While below the eagle are the letters and

The \$25 piece, of which a repique is given, was remembered.

The \$20 piece was very much like the United States piece that it bore on its obverse the designation "California"

One \$10 piece had its obverse surface chased exactly like the United States piece, on which was engraved, "Augustus Humbert, San Francisco, California, 1852." That of which a cut is given surrounded by rays, is a direct copy of a South American piece, the head and eagle of the regulation coin, but the inscription "California Gold," and on the coronet "DUBOIS & CO." Its date was 1852. The same firm issued a \$10 piece that was, however, little more

One \$5 piece was closely patterned after the United States piece, "Dunbar & Co.", alone marking the difference of setting forth the purity and honesty of their piece respectively the inscriptions, "Full Weight" and "California Gold without alloy." A large piece seen, was a half eagle called "the Massachusetts"

The gold half and quarter dollar pieces were never issued, and were never in actual circulation. They were used as charms for the bracelet and watch chain.

J. G. Kellogg and Wass, Molitor & Co. All these private issues were not only not acknowledged by, but were contrary to law; but the coin contained as much gold as the Government mintage, was a great convenience to the public, and was condoned by the United States officials. Some of the coins were very neatly executed, and stray specimens may yet be found occasionally by curious numismatics. The coins, as may be seen by the cuts that are presented with this article, were not in imitation of the mint stamps, were coined without secrecy, and were, for a time, accepted at par to the extent of millions of dollars. The material was gold, usually mixed with about 12 per cent. of silver and without any copper.

On April 3, 1854, however, the branch mint, which had been so long looked for, was opened on Commercial street, between Montgomery and Kearney, on the site now occupied by the United States Land Office. Its effects were soon felt. The foreign silver coinage was all depreciated in that year; in 1855 the octagonal slugs of Moffat & Co. were refused and in 1856 merchants rejected all the gold coinage of the private banks.

It has been found impossible to procure either examples or descriptions of all the private gold coins that were struck in the early fifties in San Francisco, but it is evident that they must have been quite numerous. As far as can be learned, there must have been about twenty issues, seventeen of which were as follows: One quintuple eagle, slug or fifty dollar piece; one double eagle, or twenty dollar piece; six eagles, or ten dollar pieces; six half eagles, or five dollar pieces; one half dollar, or gold fifty cent piece; one quarter dollar, or gold quarter.

The cut of the fifty dollar piece which is presented is that of the reverse of the coin and was evidently patterned after the old surpiece of Peru. The obverse bears the design of an eagle guarding a shield and thunderbolt, while from the beak floats a streamer on which is inscribed the word "Liberty." Over the eagle runs the inscription "United States of America," and underneath that the figures "887 Thous.," while below the eagle are the letters and figures, "50 D. C."

The \$25 piece, of which a repique is given, was very little used and is scarcely remembered.

The \$20 piece was very much like the United States coin, the distinction being that it bore on its obverse the designation "California Gold."

One \$10 piece had its obverse surface chased except in a band across its middle zone, on which was engraved, "Augustus Humbert, United States Assayer of gold coin, California, 1852." That of which a cut is given, showing the Phrygian Cap surrounded by rays, is a direct copy of a South American coin. Another eagle bore the head and eagle of the regulation coin, but around the eagle ran the inscription "California Gold," and on the coronet was inscribed the name of the utterers, "Dubosq & Co." Its date was 1852. The Miners' Bank of San Francisco also issued a \$10 piece that was, however, little more than a private token.

One \$5 piece was closely patterned after the Dubosq eagle, the name of the coiners, "Dunbar & Co.," alone marking the difference. The coiners made a point of setting forth the purity and honesty of their pieces, and two of the six half eagles bore respectively the inscriptions, "Full Weight, N. G. & N., San Francisco, 1849," and "California Gold without alloy." A peculiar coin, which was very little seen, was a half eagle called "the Massachusetts and California \$5 piece."

The gold half and quarter dollar pieces were miniature copies of the octagonal slug, and were never in actual circulation. They were regarded rather as curiosities or as charms for the bracelet and watch chain.